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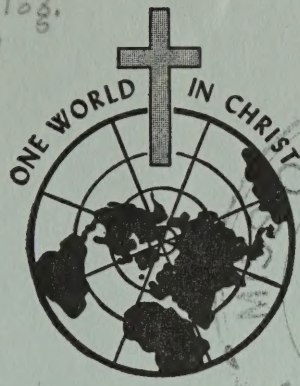

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The Christian Mission:
Its Motive and Its Task

by HOWARD SCHOMER

One of a series of speeches delivered at the 1952 Assembly of the World Christian Mission held at Toronto, Canada

DIVISION OF FOREIGN MISSIONS
OF THE
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST
IN THE U. S. A.

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YESTERDAY at this hour Dr. Samuel Moffett brought us his moving testimony that the fundamental motive of the Christian mission is holy obedience: that we go out because He sends us, that the essential task of the Christian mission is to witness and to serve, and that we can only lead the world to Jesus Christ by following him ourselves along the whole road of his suffering even unto his death. And out of the vigorous debate yesterday afternoon, two thoughts expressed by Dr. John Mackay continue, I am sure, to stir many of our minds: the church fulfils its mission in history when it makes manifest God's redemptive will for all of life; the unity which is given to all the churches in Jesus Christ reveals itself as a "road unity," a partnership in obedience and action.

I do not know how we can better portray the dynamic theme of this Assembly—The World Christian Mission: Every Nation Under God—than in the very scriptural image which I seem to see in my mind's eye as I meditate on the most intense passages of yesterday's addresses: a road, a road climbing toward Jerusalem, toward the New Jerusalem as toward the old and often-beleaguered earthly city; a Man, a cross-bearing but triumphant Man leading out along that way; a curiously varied throng of human beings, some extraordinary, some most ordinary, following in his wake, their whole mission, or their unity, their single motive, or their task, to imitate Him in every gesture of admonition, of invitation, of mercy, and of love which He addresses to the indifferent or the railing multitudes all along the way.

To what other image could we conform ourselves, would-be Christians that we earnestly are, would-be churches, would-be missionary societies, would-be ecumenical movements and councils? Alone He who so walks before us today and always has the words of life.

This is our general doctrine, indisputably true. But what does it mean in concrete practice? Is it more than inspiring, but impracticable myth? The stretch of the road over which the Christ is leading in our generation, at home and abroad, is very broken and jagged and it passes through bitterly contested territory, through the very midst of tribes

savagely hostile to all he teaches, commands, and is. He calls upon us for "Purity," and the sensual tribes roar back "Pleasure." He enjoins "Poverty" and the tribes, both the ragged and the adorned, shriek for "Prosperity." He points us toward perfect Service, and the tribes grasp for unlimited Profits. He leads us toward utter Humility and some of the tribes vaunt their arrogant Haughtiness. He embodies total Peace, and some prepare total War. He preaches infinite Forgiveness, they exact their own Revenge. He confides Himself wholly to the Kingdom of God, the tribes mock Divine Righteousness and put all their trust in rival kingdoms of men.

The tribes? The others? The world? From four centuries back various German and French Protestants have inherited a prayer which they, in stark honesty about themselves, often repeat today:

"I confess here before thee, most Holy God, that I am a poor sinful creature and that I have, alas, deeply offended thee, several times and in various ways, not only through coarse and manifest sins—by impiety, sacrilege, profanity, lying, injustice, anger, intemperance, sensuality; but also through interior and hidden sins—by bad thoughts and criminal desires, by disbelief, mistrust, impatience, pride, greed, envy, hatred and a great number of other sins of which I confess myself guilty and which thou knowest much better than I do myself. I detest all these sins and for them I do repent, truly regretting that I have committed them. With all my heart I ask thee grace and pardon, O my God. For the love of thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, I promise to renounce all of these my sins, and I pray thee, Lord, to help me in this my resolution, by thy Holy Spirit. Amen."

Because all this impiety of the furious tribes is not only something of the world, it has infiltrated through the centuries into the churches. It is in us church-members, influencing even our catechetical teaching, revealing itself in the sorry compromises of our public pronouncements. Whether we think of that Fourth Century Council which explained the difference between the Gospel commandments which are compulsory for all Christians and the Gospel "Counsels of Perfection," binding in principle only for the monastic "holy men," or whether we

think of the more recent justification of atomic warfare or class warfare in the name of social relevance and responsibility, we can only speak of our World Mission as Christians if at each step on the way we make clear to ourselves and to the world, as well as before God, our genuine repentance.

I suppose that no mission station is so far from the main-currents of today's revolt against the Gospel that we would find the people round about it still entirely unaffected by the tempests which Tracey Jones and others have here described. Europe is, we all know, that part of the world where the storms have raged longest. European Christians today, both Catholic and Protestant, are aware that much of their continent now constitutes a new kind of mission field. The World Christian Mission in the middle of the Twentieth Century includes a great new task: the recovery for Christ of several hundred million ex-Christians, modern western white men, their children and grandchildren. This is a key area of vast urgency.

When our fellow-Christians in Great Britain told us a few years ago that possibly no more than 15% of the inhabitants of the British Isles are now significantly connected with any church, a great shock was felt in Christian circles on this side of the Atlantic. But we Protestants hardly noticed that, about the same time, the Archbishop of Toulouse stated that in France probably no more than four million grown-ups go to confessional and mass the canonical minimum of once a year. Other Catholic authorities protested that this figure is too pessimistic, that six or seven million would be a better estimate. Now French Protestants, by an equally liberal standard, certainly number no more than one million at the very most. France, too, has something like 15% among her people who are church affiliated.

If the slight German ecclesiastical tax is still paid without protest by 95% of the population, and if most all German children, like their fathers and forefathers, receive some kind of religious instruction as part of their public school course, many competent and friendly observers doubt whether more than 10% of the inhabitants of an average community have any voluntary and significant contact with the Christian churches.

We have seen how seriously the Pope's order to forsake the communist party has been taken by the mass of Italian workers. If in Spain where, according to the latest American investigation, "the economy is being held together today with baling wire and hope," the people should be allowed to restore freedom without any intervention by foreign powers, we might find that a good many less than the 99% of the population which the Franco regime calls Roman Catholic are such in fact. And in one of the most Protestant cities in Switzerland the ministerial association told me that only ten to twenty percent of the people are still in meaningful relationship to the churches.

In a word, an honest non-partisan report would seem to indicate that in some western European regions traditionally Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church has become the church the people stay away from, but in other regions, traditionally Protestant, the same thing has occurred. To be sure, as the remarkable war-time study by two French priests, "France, Mission Field?" makes evident, the sociological reality of the church is a veritable mosaic composed of three distinct kinds of pieces: little isles of Christendom, still almost intact and often ingrown; districts where the churches are rather empty but a vestige of Christian culture and morality still is evident; and openly, startlingly pagan areas. With regard to the latter, found especially in regions of rapid industrial growth, but also in certain rural sections, it is possible to speak of a "post-Christian era." There the fathers or grandfathers have commonly broken consciously with the church. There, I might add, a worker may regard "Protestantism as the least absurd religion," a prefect may avow that "if he had faith, he would be a Protestant." But there also, it must be added, millions of men have been immunized against the Gospel by an idolatrous or a socially oppressive church, known in their youth and forever rejected.

After each war, 1871, 1918, 1945, Anglo-Saxon Christians have gone to the continent to bring material relief and have discovered the deeper ruins of Christendom. They have discovered thus a "field urgency," and rather often set about, mobile style, to do something about it individually or by inde-

pendent sectarian action. Sometimes they have met with a certain disdain for the spiritual problem of the masses on the part of the old existent Protestant churches, sometimes they have not bothered very much to seek to coordinate their well-intentioned efforts with that of the historic representatives of Protestantism in the land.

Today, happily for the World Christian Mission, the re-occupation of this lost territory of the *oikumene* can be readily planned interdenominationally by Protestants in Europe and abroad. Indeed, it is a major concern of that interchurch aid which Dr. Mackay termed a most important expression of the ecumenical movement. But if the organizational structure is ready for such cooperation, real achievement in the field is very hard.

The motive must be the opening of individual hearts *and* whole social classes to Christ's redeeming power. It is no longer adequate, if it ever was so, to concentrate wholly on "flycasting" for individual souls who are no sooner caught than they are literally "fish-out-of-water" proletarians become Christian outcasts. But how permeate a whole antagonistic milieu? The Catholic Church has been in agony for nearly 20 years over this very problem, and Protestant attempts to solve it have been numerous but ill prepared and almost wholly unequipped and unsupported. What an urgent task is then ours to face this problem with our awakened European brethren, to walk down the narrow alley with them, lined on one side by the crumbling fortresses of medieval Catholicism, on the other by the smooth monolithic but not uncracked "wall of materialism." Together down that road, will we not follow the Christ and learn from Him? In Europe today the preacher who opens for his people the text, "I am the way"—never thinks of a great super highway. The Christ he knows is a lonely, an ascending mountain road, resistant to the downward pull of the easier plains. He is no golden boulevard, no Champs-Elysees; "the way" is just such a narrow walled-in alley as European Protestants must walk. But he knows that, between the Black Reaction of the Right and the Red Reaction of the left, that "way" leads to life, for the believing

man and class and country here on earth, and for indestructible souls in the ages to come.

I should like to close without raising one last problem, but I sense that I should not be confiding in you completely were I so to do. There are two more things North American Protestants must be ready to do if they would not cause evangelization efforts in Europe to fail. They must hang free, very free, from that arch-individualistic society and economy in which they live, even as pastors, and from which they come to visit or to study or to work in Europe. Several times in this assembly, where the stinging experiences in Red China are sharply present in our minds, we have dwelt upon the obstacle, the competition which communism constitutes for the missionary movement in the world. This opposition is certainly one of the cardinal facts of our time. But are we going to forget, precisely now, all that the Social Gospel taught us about the moral incompatibility of Christianity and capitalism? Rethink all the propositions and criticisms of Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch and all their latter-day students. Correct them in their basic theoretical errors and bring up to date the factual picture of the capitalism which they portrayed. But do not let the prophetic function of social criticism become atrophied or anodyne in this of all days. For the vast preponderance of North American Protestantism in the social reality of Christianity today is already leading many abroad to ask whether our Christianity is in danger of becoming more North-American than Christian.

And what shall I say of the other problem—our World Christian Mission and War. We are tired of pacifist-non-pacifist Christian dialogues. We have so gladly accepted the "vocational pacifist" theory and the flat Amsterdam statement of three recognized but contradictory opinions held by Christians on war: a Christian obeys his state; a Christian joins in just wars only; a Christian for conscience's sake refuses all he can physically withhold to the war-making powers. And so a kind of "live-and-let-live" period has set in as the best wisdom we can at present attain in this matter. Things are smoothed over in the Christian family, and the only thing that

suffers is the seamless garment of Christ's truth, torn in three parts.

I cannot help feeling that more than such mutual forbearance and ecclesiastical diplomacy is called for on this grave matter in this hour. The masses of the people in areas that have known war devastation are whole-heartedly opposed to more of the same. Oh, an authoritarian state can always conscript their bodies and make them go through the motions, be it in the East or the West, and fear and rage and envy can make them fight, for they have rarely a sufficient basis and a courage to stand out long against the pressure. But each time a crisis is past, they despise themselves and detest the spiritual leaders who blessed their cause or that of their "enemies," however complicated and conditional the blessing. Today the American theologian who goes to Europe and preaches the moral duty of rearmament, especially of German rearmament, does more harm to the work of the church than any communists have yet been able to accomplish. For they can only attack our faith from without, but he undermines it from within, and makes it for the masses a tool of the corrupt society which they long to transform.

I have been so brash as to accept an impossible task, to follow in the wake of the great addresses of yesterday on the large doctrinal principles upon which our mission stands. I have tried to set forth a few of the specific implications of that mission in the area of the world which I have been prospecting with European colleagues through the post-war years. I trust that what I have reported objectively and what I may have interpreted all too personally will alike serve to spur on the many boards to a greater concern for more and better work in Europe, a vast field of poignant urgency for cooperative missionary labor in this age of sincere ecumenical aspiration.

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